

*** NETANSWERS INTERNET EXTRA ***
For the week of January 19, 1998

There are people on the Internet who are telling you lies. Mistruths. Fables and fibs. Urban legends. They spread them via e-mail, in newsgroups, on the web, and the people who are spreading these rumors probably don't even know they are false. E-mail viruses, the \$250 cookie recipe, the kid's dying wish, and more: all untrue, none worth your time. Read on for the story.

=*=* CONTENTS: SOAPBOX FOR ME, GRAINS OF SALT FOR YOU *=*=

So there I was, reading my e-mail on a Saturday afternoon, when the message came:

I am writing you this to inform you of a very important matter currently under review by the FCC. Your local telephone company has filed a proposal with the FCC to impose per minute charges for your Internet service. They contend that your usage has or will hinder the operation of the telephone network...

Send your comments to [the FCC] and tell them what you think. Every phone company is in on this one, and they are trying to sneak it in just under the wire for litiagation [sic]. Let everyone you know here this one. Get the e-mail address to everyone you can think of.

The message was sent by a well-meaning associate to me and about 50 other people she knows. This wasn't the first time I had seen this message: I'd received copies from three other associates in the past weeks. I can certainly understand why -- in the U.S., Internet access is cheap and no one wants to pay more for it.

The only problem is: the facts of the message are completely wrong. Breathless, imploring messages like that one are seldom accurate or timely.

In fall of 1996, several telephone companies did indeed file a proposal with the FCC to impose per minute charges for Internet service. A few months later, the FCC rejected the proposal. The issue has been dead for well over a year. You can verify this information at the FCC's web site -- it has set up a special page on this subject: http://www.fcc.gov/Bureaus/Common_Carrier/Factsheets/ispfact.html

-.-. Dying Wishes -.-.

There are many other examples of out-of-date information and urban legends floating around the Internet. Every so often one of them sees a surge of popularity and makes a comeback for a few weeks.

A timeless one is the story of Craig Shergold, a 9-year-old English boy who, diagnosed with a terminal brain tumor, wanted to be recorded in the Guinness Book of World Records for receiving the most greeting cards. The message gives an address where you can send a card. However, the message doesn't say that a) Craig didn't die and is now 18 years old, b) his wish was fulfilled in 1990 after receiving 16 million cards, and c) everyone really, really wants the cards to stop coming. Various versions of the story float around the Net, for instance one in which Craig wants business cards. The Make-A-Wish Foundation has a web page on the topic: <http://www.wish.org/wish/craig.html>

Still other chain letters have no basis in reality, such as the one about "Little Jessica Mydek," who is said to be suffering from cancer with her own dying wish (to inform people of her condition and to send the message to "live life to the fullest"). The American Cancer Society, which is supposedly involved, has issued a statement about this one, at <http://www.cancer.org/chain.html>

-.-.- Urban Legends -.-.-

Some tales are scarier, ghost stories that are passed around the Net like candy. A perennial favorite is the so-called "e-mail virus". These messages say that if you receive an electronic mail message with a certain subject line (such as "Good Times" or "PENPAL GREETINGS" or "Deeyenda") and read it, your computer will be ruined. As I wrote in Internet Extra #6 (on viruses): Despite the dire warnings, your computer cannot catch a virus simply by reading an e-mail message from a stranger. Now, if an e-mail message contains an attached program, that program can harbor a virus -- but just reading an e-mail message can't hurt your machine.

Have you seen the message about the \$250 cookie recipe yet? Stay on the Net long enough and you will. The story goes: Neiman-Marcus (or sometimes Mrs. Fields), charged a shopper \$250 for its cookie recipe rather than the \$2.50 the customer had been expecting to pay. As revenge on the store for refusing to reverse the charge, she now provides the recipe for free and exhorts others to pass it along. Versions of this story are more than 50 years old. It isn't true now and probably wasn't true even then. The Urban Legends References Pages have the whole truth and nothing but, at <http://www.snopes.com/spoons/faxlore/cookie.htm>. Neiman-Marcus itself has a few choice words on the matter at <http://www.neimanmarcus.com/custserv/default.htm>.

-.-.- More Resources -.-.-

There are still more hoaxes and chain letters out there. Two excellent web pages on the subject have been created by the Computer Incident Advisory Capability at Lawrence Livermore National Labs: <http://ciac.llnl.gov/ciac/CIACHoaxes.html> focuses on hoaxes and <http://ciac.llnl.gov/ciac/CIACChainLetters.html> focuses specifically on chain letters. It is worthwhile reading that can help you avoid being duped, even by a well-meaning friend. Some sections are rather amusing, such as the warning about "Internet Cleanup Day." This bogus message explains that the "Internet must be shut down for 24 hours in order to allow us to clean it." Other tales debunked in these pages are more grizzly: like the warnings about kidneys being harvesting from unsuspecting victims. Yucky, but also untrue.

If you receive a message that implores you to act and/or to forward it to other people, take it with a large grain of salt. Take the time to verify the information for yourself before forwarding it to several dozen of your closest friends. Consider the source -- that is, if a source is even given. Otherwise you just waste a lot of peoples' time.

=*=*= SITES MENTIONED IN THIS ISSUE =*==

FCC on Internet surcharge: http://www.fcc.gov/Bureaus/Common_Carrier/Factsheets/ispfact.html

Make-A-Wish Foundation on Craig Shergold: <http://www.wish.org/wish/craig.html>

American Cancer Society on Jessica Mydek: <http://www.cancer.org/chain.html>

Urban Legends References Pages on Neiman-Marcus cookies: <http://www.snopes.com/spoons/faxlore/cookie.htm>

Neiman-Marcus on Neiman-Marcus cookies: <http://www.neimanmarcus.com/custserv/default.htm>

CIAC on hoaxes: <http://ciac.llnl.gov/ciac/CIACHoaxes.html>

CIAC on chain letters: <http://ciac.llnl.gov/ciac/CIACChainLetters.html>

=*=*= THE END =*=*=

The NetAnswers Internet Extra is free to all CompuServe members. It's available in the Internet Community Forum -- GO INETCOM and look in file library 11, "NetAnswers".

Got comments or ideas for future newsletter issues? We want to hear 'em. Just send a message to savetz@compuserve.com (74774,2725).

You put the boom boom into my heart. You send my soul sky high when the loving starts. Jitterbug into my brain, yeah yeah, it goes bang, bang, bang 'till I'm...
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